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## REFLECTIONS ON PRESENT-DAY ARTISTS

The recently opened salon of the Société Nationale is not without certain earmarks which I think are significant and worthy of comment. The dominant characteristics of the show are in no sense peculiar to Paris, but obtain in equal degree probably in all the displays offered in European and American art centers. The exhibition is a witness either of paucity of ideas and limited scope of resources, or else of a slavish adherence to methods and motives with which the public is somewhat weary. Are our artists bankrupt in the matter of ideas, or have they simply gotten into a rut from which they cannot lift themselves?

I have no intention to offer a categorical review of the salon or to dwell in detail on any individual canvases—I have already done this in letters to the press—but I do wish to record for the readers of *BRUSH AND PENCIL* some of the impressions given and of the thoughts excited by the many galleries of the salon. In doing this I may be pardoned if in a measure I use the same words I have used in other critiques.

What one prizes as delicious in an art salon is the impression of rejuvenation which it gives to one; and this is just what is lacking in the present salon. Twelve months have passed. Events have come and gone. The face of the world has been modified, but to all appearances the art of painting has not changed. We have thrust upon us the rather tiresome fact that the same men always paint the same works.

Indeed, as one traverses gallery after gallery the new canvases all seem familiar, and one is inclined to imagine that the year that has just passed is but an unpleasant dream. Nothing, as I have said elsewhere, has moved, nothing has grown older. One had hoped after twelve months to meet some of the younger generation of painters in the front rank. But a study of the various galleries of the salon almost convinces one that there are no young painters. We are assured that the doors have been thrown open to new men and that new aspirants may lay claim without prejudice to the salon's honors, and yet the exhibition as a whole is but a vision of past salons.

On looking closer, however, the visitor will be able to note some differences. The hand of one master—I am quoting myself—has become heavier, the eye of another dimmer. General fatigue seems to have come over the older generation of painters, they seem awaiting some new formula. Or is a new formula awaiting the proper moment to make its appearance? Or has it, perhaps, been proclaimed without our being aware of it?

A clew to the prevailing characteristics of the salon is doubtless to be found outside of its galleries. To grasp the full significance of the artistic year one must take into account the numerous private exhibitions, the shop windows of the picture dealer, and especially follow the patient effort of painters who have not forced the attention of the various Mæcenases. What, then, is the importance of the salon?

I have ventured to state elsewhere that it has an industrial importance. The trade in pictures has greatly developed in France, as it has elsewhere. Indeed, one is inclined to believe it is too much developed. The world is full of doubting Thomases as regards the theory of art for art's sake. The artist has been told so often that he has a right to live from his art that he believes it implicitly. He has become as much a business man as an artist, and he paints on the dictates of the dealers or what he believes will sell.

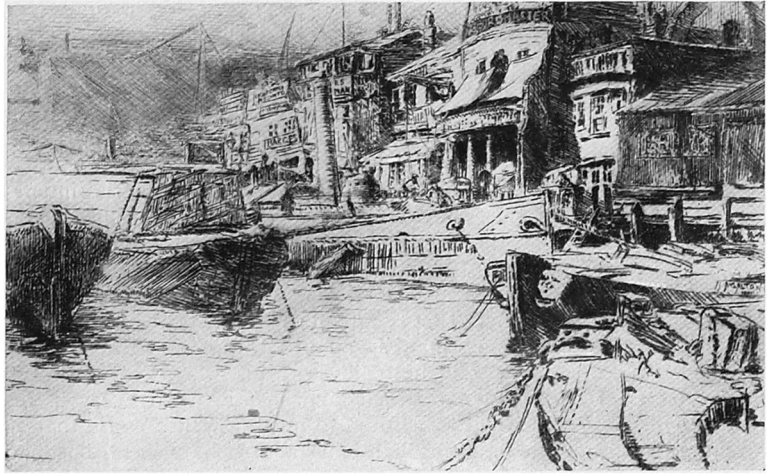
The picture that has a commercial savor has invaded everywhere. Perhaps this may be called "painting to meet a want." Be that as it may, this policy of art going hand in hand with business has had one direct result. It has brought painting to acceptable proportions, it has reduced subjects to proper dimensions, it has brought back the picture from the exhibition room to the apartment. Thus, as I have chosen to express myself on another occasion, the current salon appears like a series of little New-Year's Day booths. For this the picture dealers are responsible, for they have introduced this mercantile spirit.

Indeed, at the present time there are quotations for pictures as there are quotations on the stock exchange, and this is complicated by fictitious financial operations. People "launch" a painter as they launch a foreign loan. They push him to the front; they exaggerate his merits; they buy in his works to prevent a slump in prices. There are cracks and booms and on the Bourse—pardon. I mean the salesroom—such and such a painter drops so many points.

I may be pardoned for repeating the odd notion that has occurred to me since studying the present salon, that the day is coming when a critic will sum up his judgments in the following fashion: "Bad day for impressionists. The Sisleys finished with a drop of several thousand francs. The Monet division felt the bad turn of the market. Degas alone was firm at the conclusion of the day," etc.

In point of fact, the salon is pleasing to look upon. It is an exhibition where pictures are presented with perfect taste and with that respect for art which one certainly does not find elsewhere. There is little that is really admirable, but also little that is frankly bad.

As regards portraiture, we have evidence of a school of painters of female portraits of the first order. Each gallery of the exhibition has its picture of a woman in full toilet, handsomely dressed, and some quieter portraits, full of discreet grace and delicately rendered. Of



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this form of art Jacques Blanche, Faivre, Delvaille, Sargent, Carolus Duran, Gervex, and Dagnan are notable exponents. In view of such an exhibition of inspiration and technique, one is impelled to wonder what trouble the writer will have who a hundred years hence will try to write the history of female portrait-painters in our epoch, and what he must do to be a complete historian of other characteristics!

Another reflection one has forced upon him is the conviction that this exhibition is a return to the art of the eighteenth century. The work of Besnard resembles that of Fragnard la Touche. It has his commodes, his bowls, and his dark golden color. Besnard draws his inspiration from the same period, and is not this taste for striking and ornate portraiture part and parcel of the reversion of taste as regards other themes to eighteenth-century ideas?

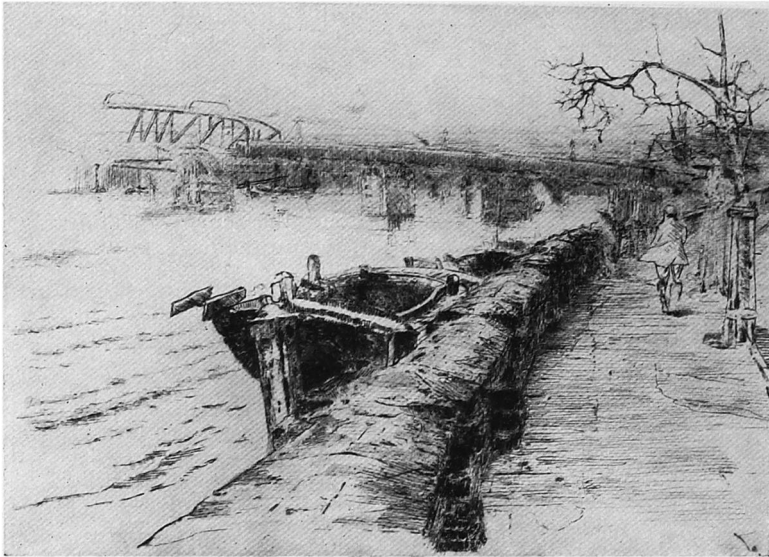
The eighteenth century had its greatness as well as its weakness, and so has the present day. In spite of all revolutions, in art as in politics, we reach this refined æstheticism where delicacy excludes force and where shading of color interferes with vigor. Over and over again in this exhibition we find this fact emphasized; over and over again we find this reversion to former tastes and methods; over and over again we find the painters who have long been in the public eye harping on the same old string or repeating, with variations it may be, some former success.

Carolus Duran, for instance, is now at the epoch of his career, where public respect and admiration stop or suppress all discussion.

Production with him is but a matter of pride. He could retire with grace, but he seeks to affirm the surprising youth and vigor of his talent, and thus he assumes to-day the difficult rôle of being a portraitist of men, a portraitist of women, and a landscapist. In a word, all the Carolus Durans who have successively had our appreciation are presented here together.

Jacques Blanche has long had the honor, and justly, of being regarded as one of France's best portraitists, but as I have elsewhere phrased it, he also holds power of attorney from Dame Notoriety, occupying in this respect a place between Lawrence and Nadar. Each spring he presents us a painter, a poet, and a musician. The trio has heretofore regularly met applause, and this has been deemed sufficient excuse for their reappearance. Guignard is guilty of the same—shall we call it offense? He drives out his sheep, then drives them in, then brings them out again, and takes them in anew. They are the same sheep, and the same Guignard is the painter, and the sheep are preserved in a blackish juice which we dare not specify.

La Touche does show change if not development. He has at last given up yellow, and has striven for more brilliant color effects. But again we have this reversion to a past ideal. He evokes visions of princesses who are followed by brilliant cortèges. There are furtive



THE THAMES AT KILBANK—ETCHING  
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embracings surprised in corners of the Louis XV. apartments. One could believe one's self in a novel by M. de Regnier. And what should one say of Thaulow? Well, the water continues to flow in his pictures. What a lot of it has flowed under his bridges. What quantities of water, and always seen from above. This year he offers six canvases, of which two are less "Thaulowet" than usual.



CHARTRES—ETCHING  
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Obertin seems to have been gradually losing his gift. A few years ago he had marvelous power as a colorist, he had the promise of an original and inquiring painter, but from year to year his canvases have become tamer and more colorless. This year his four small canvases are somewhat indicative of hope for the future. Pierre Laurens's work is serious, pleasing, and sincere, but not convincing. He seems to glory in his father's color and his father's methods, and to have the ambition to apply them to more modest and more modern subjects. Hochard leaped to fame at a single bound last year, and this year he remains exactly where he landed a year ago. Bertrand's big canvas is but the enlargement of an instantaneous photograph. Moreau Delaton persists in sending hasty studies, but this year they are better colored and more interesting. Dauchez acquired reputation by pictures of sober qualities, and he keeps on dipping his brush in the same dark juice, refusing to

become gay. Of Denit one can say a more hopeful word. He is the one truly Oriental painter of whom France can boast, the only one who has taken the trouble to penetrate and comprehend the Arab soul. He at least is progressive, since he does not content himself with the superficial and brilliant impression which the majority of painters bring back from Algeria.

Dagnan's art, which forces one's esteem, does not arouse enthusiasm, and thus his talent only succeeds in making a cold impression. His exhibit has neither seduction, color, charm, expression, nor the merit of the unexpected. His drawing is painstaking and correct. The faults of the painter are the ransom of his qualities. Indeed, one may say he has no longer any faults. One may venture the assertion that having obtained every possible result, he is content to rest on his laurels. He paints, therefore, in a disillusioned fashion, in fatigue, and almost impoverished. His tenacious efforts have ever been toward a goal which he will never attain.

One is impelled to sympathize with Walter Gay. He paints in solitude. He paints clocks, fireplaces, corridors, and galleries, and when he has finished he begins afresh. They are graceful pictures, sadly sweet and surely painted, but his exhibit leads one to suspect that his career has ended in ennui. Lobre is another painter shackled to his past. I have called him a prisoner, shut up in a deserted palace. He keeps on wandering in vast rooms, repeating with scarce a change the scenes of his sumptuous prison. One would welcome some suggestion of actuality, of human life, but the fear of human faces pursues him to such an extent that he even fears the busts he sometimes paints.

This year Sargent imitates himself, and Truchet has imitated Rochegrosse. Gervex has reverted to women's portraits, but withal is to be praised for his brilliancy as a colorist. L'Hermitte has nothing to offer that will surprise his former admirers, nor has Friant. Le Gout Gérard is still anchored in his little Breton port, from which he refuses to be divorced by tide or tempest. This year again his boats are seen entering or leaving the harbor, dipped in acrid violet, which is his special property. One knows them well. They have not changed since the last fishing season at least.

And so one might continue citing case after case in which the artist has simply sought to duplicate former successes, repeat old color schemes, introduce afresh the same familiar faces and figures, play the same tricks with brush and palette, never offering us a surprise, never evidencing a suspicion that the world moves on, that the people are not chained to the past, that they do appreciate and would welcome heartily a change of subject or coloring or technique. In a word, people want something to show that the happy hit of yesterday has not been stereotyped for a lifetime.

But then, perhaps, one should not be too severe on the artists. Commercialism is a power. Artists get reputations for certain qualities or certain themes—something they have undertaken to pre-empt. By these are they known, by these are they boomed by the dealers. The dealers want what they want, and what else can the painters do but paint what the dealers sell?

PIERRE VEBER.